

Dostoevsky and Chernyshevsky

Information and Questions for Reading

First Dostoevsky ("The Grand Inquisitor" and "Dream of a Ridiculous Man"), then the excerpt from Chernyshevsky.

I presume you have heard of Fyodor (Fëodor) Dostoevsky (1821-1881), one of the most famous Russian writers. If not, information on him is widely available, or you can ask me, or take Brian Johnson's course on him. It's worth noting for our purposes that he was educated as a military engineer, though for most of his life he worked as a writer, journalist, editor, and publisher.

"The Grand Inquisitor" is a chapter of his final and very long novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* (or, The Karamazov Brothers), 1879-1880. Ivan Karamazov and Alexei (Alyosha) Karamazov have grown up apart since their mother died and their badboy father wasn't willing to raise them; The younger, Alyosha, was taken in by a loving family and raised with warmth and care, while Ivan has been making his own way by writing feuilletons for the newspapers, tutoring students, etc. Alyosha is very religious and has become a novice at the local monastery; Ivan is a New Man and is at least passing as an atheist. At this point in the novel, the two of them finally get together in a little inn and talk; Ivan says a lot about how certain crimes can't be forgiven (he has newspaper clippings - like the real Dostoevsky - about horrible episodes of child abuse. Then he tells Alyosha his "poem" of the Grand Inquisitor, which forms a separate chapter.

Dostoevsky was very anti-Catholic (and in particular anti-Polish, as well as anti-Semitic, which doesn't come up in this particular text), and he felt that the Western European Catholics were to blame for coming up with Socialism (in a way that may express the trauma of his arrest, mock execution, and prison in Siberia followed by years of exile). This chapter plays a significant role in the novel, BUT in the many years since the novel was published it has been taken out of the novel and read as a separate thing. That is how we will read it here, but that's not how it was intended.

Questions for Reading:

- 1) What do you know about the Spanish Inquisition - or the whole Counter-Reformation - and how might that historical knowledge shape your reaction to the Grand Inquisitor?
- 2) We are reading this mostly as background to the anti-utopias coming up, but: how persuasive is Dostoevsky's take on (early phases) of socialism? Does the religious (or - at its core - atheist) dimension make sense to a reader today? How does it compare to contemporary discussions about socialism, or pejorative uses of the term "socialist" in recent political discourse in the United States?

Dostoevsky and his brother had edited a journal for a while after he returned from exile, but it was closed by the censors after a misunderstanding, and the next journal they attempted failed for more ordinary reasons. But late in his life Dostoevsky began to publish *Diary of a Writer*, which is a diary in the journalistic sense: a daily. It came out from 1873 to 1881 (with a break while he was concentrating on writing *Brothers Karamazov*). Here he fulminated against the bad things he saw in Russian society, reacted to current events (which he had always followed with eager attention), and from time to time published a story of his own. "Dream of a Ridiculous Man" is one of these, a story that recalls some of Dostoevsky's early Romanticism. It engages with our topic in two ways: more trivially, in its incorporation of angel-powered space flight; more substantially, in the question of what an earthly human might bring to a new planet, and the whole question of a civilization's moral evolution.

Questions for Reading:

- 1) If Dostoevsky were not such a big name, would we even be reading this? Are there issues here that you want to track through future weeks?
- 2) Why does the story need another planet?
- 3) How does the narrator's moral regeneration impact your reading of "The Grand Inquisitor"?

Chernyshevsky: “Vera Pavlova’s Dream” from **What Is To Be Done?** (1863)

Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828-1889) is more important as a thinker than as a writer, but **What Is To Be Done** (Lenin’s favorite novel, and quite possibly the worse novel ever written, if we exclude novel-length things meant for beach reading) was one of the most influential, life-altering books in the history of Russian literature and culture.

Chernyshevsky was born in the Russian provincial city of Saratov, where his father was the local priest. He had the usual seminary education of a priest’s son and was expected to become a priest himself. (Lots of Russian positivist radicals and “men of the 1860s” were “поповичи,” priest’s sons, with typical seminary names like “Dobroliubov” (Добролюбов) ‘lover of good’, and you can see the influence of Bible study and hagiographic reading all over their assumptions about society and proper morality.) Chernyshevsky left seminary in 1845 and started St. Petersburg University, at that time the most élite educational institution in Russia, in 1846. There he read the western radical authors (Feuerbach, Louis Blanc, Proudhon, Fourier) and witnessed the failed European revolutions in 1848, which persuaded him that liberalism could not change the world. He started work on his master’s thesis at St. Petersburg U in 1853 and began his journalistic career in 1854. At first he wrote literary criticism (inspired by the late, great critic Vissarion Belinskii), but then he moved more and more into “publitsistika” and other kinds of social commentary. He failed his thesis defense in 1855; the thesis offended many readers by suggesting that reality was superior to any kind of art: not only is an apple better than a painting of an apple, but that a good pair of boots is worth more than Pushkin, in crude summary. By 1857, Ch’s writing had shifted entirely to socio-economic questions.

The Russian government, devoted to “autocracy, nationality, and orthodoxy,” did not appreciate Chernyshevsky’s writing and growing influence over young people especially, and after about a year of secret police surveillance he was arrested in 1862. He wrote **What Is To Be Done?** in prison (in the Peter and Paul Fortress), and the censors inexplicably allowed the novel to be serialized in the journal Chernyshevsky wrote for, **The Contemporary** (ironically enough, it had been founded by Pushkin). There was no evidence against Chernyshevsky, but he still underwent a civil execution (a sword broken over his head on a public platform in front of a gallows) and was sentenced to seven years of hard labor and exile for life. He wrote nothing

else with the same impact as **What Is To Be Done?**, but his sentence was interpreted as a martyrdom, and it alienated many Russians who had felt hopeful about the changes introduced in the early 1860s. The harsh conditions of prison and exile broke his health and he died at 61. He is still widely respected in Russia (a subway stop in St Petersburg is named after him).

There's a fascinating polemical version of his life in Chapter 4 of Vladimir Nabokov's great Russian novel, **The Gift** (1937): Nabokov depicts the Russian émigré community rising in offense at his hero Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev's presentation of Chernyshevsky, and life imitated art when the real Russian émigrés were offended at Nabokov for this version of Chernyshevsky's story – he (Ch.) was such a sacred cow, even among people who had fled or been exiled from the new Soviet Union (where Chernyshevsky was of course even more sacred).

Chernyshevsky makes lots of narrative meta-comments that present his novel as poorly written, and himself as a non-author, not concerned with artistry but with Truth. “Vera Pavlova’s Dream” is an exception: he cites bits of poems and song; you can tell he’s trying to write as expressively as he can, with pathos! This chapter also shows his feminism, one of the most attractive sides of Chernyshevsky’s personality. **What Is To Be Done?** inspired many young female readers to study science and medicine - as Vera Pavlovna is doing by the end of the novel – and many young male readers to support women in getting access to education in Western Europe, especially Switzerland.

A note on her name: “Pavlovna” is a patronymic, telling us that her father’s name is Pavel (her brother would be “Pavlovich”) – as Leonid’s common-law wife in the first part of Red Star is “Anna Nikoaevna,” with a father named Nikolai. You can imagine how this naming convention, still alive and well in Russia, inscribes every single person with *le Nom du Père* (to cite the French feminist critics) and marks their place in the patriarchy. She refers once to “Sasha” – her (second) husband, a doctor/scientist (I forget exactly what!) named Aleksandr.

No questions for reading “Vera Pavlova’s Dream,” it’s a secondary reading meant to open your appreciation of **We**, but please note:

- The attention to women’s history;

- The somewhat confusing two sisters personify Labor and Pleasure, who lead Vera Pavlovna through the dream;
- The Crystal Palace, based on the first steel-and-glass building in England;
- The plausibility (or not) of such a rational and educative dream (Zamiatin's are much more likely);
- The vision of an ideal socialist society that's also ecologically well-integrated;
- Everyone comes to work and works; the old people age late: work is good for you!
- Amusing reference to aluminum as very expensive: it's a highly reactive metal and used to be very rare and expensive (Napoleon famously had a tray and a drinking service made of aluminum), until the discovery of how to extract it from bauxite;
- Chernyshevsky stresses more than once that people who want to do something different (eat alone; linger in the north through fall and winter) are free to do so, as are people who want to pay extra for special things and whims;
- Vera Pavlovna, that creature of 19th-century St Petersburg, asks, “And who will wait on the tables?” even though no one waits on *her* when she's at home;
- These happy socialists take turns singing in the choir and playing in the orchestra (page 257) - performing and enjoying the show. Art, if not labor in general, has become less specialized, and many humans are equipped to make it and enjoy it;
- In one scene, people are flirting with each other and then leaving the crowd to go have sex in private. Dear old Chernyshevsky – imagining that women can enjoy having sex!
- Though this is a very small excerpt, perhaps you can see why people loved this novel so much, and why it was so formative and influential in spite of its strong didactic tone. In the Soviet period, it never went out of print and was read and studied by school children, which can't have helped its reputation.

Information and Questions for discussion

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Tsiokovsky → (<https://www.swarthmore.edu/russian-and-east-european-science-fiction/konstantin-tsiokovsky-and-nikolai-fyodorov>)

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